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Book review: Radio Happy Isles: Media and Politics at Play in the Pacific

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Book Reviews

Editor: Martin Hirst

SEWARD, Robert (1999)

Radio Happy Isles: Media and Politics at Play in the Pacific,
University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu. 236 pp.

ISBN 0-8248 2014-2 Cloth \$45, ISBN 0-8248-2106-8 pbk, rrp \$24.95

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Now he lives in Tokyo and New York, but readers of *Radio Happy Isles* get the impression that Robert Seward would rather be doing what he did when he researched this book: meandering across the Pacific, listening to local radio wherever he went. He recorded broadcasts, sat in newsrooms, met the people who ran the stations and those who listened. These are the island stations where personal paid messages (like classifieds in newspapers) are often the main revenue stream, where one person might run the whole station, where local talk and music might be much greater a percentage of airtime than stations in Australia or New Zealand – simply because imported content that costs money can't be afforded.

The population of the Pacific is young: in the Solomons the median age is 15.8 years, in Vanuatu 17.6, and the local groups are young too, their songs recorded on cassette tapes sold for about \$Aust 10. The music is local and appeals to local culture, so diverse it ranges from what Seward calls Pacific country and western to Buala Reggae from the Solomon Islands group Sisirikiti and "Pacific West African soca with a little mbaqanga (Zulu pop) thrown in". [What a wonderful word for Scrabble, mbaqanga! Locally they call it calypso.]

There are still some reflections of the BBC on local radio throughout the Pacific but national public service broadcasting is changing and fading fast, supplementing its funds with commercials or, in Tonga, a Radio Store which sells and repairs electric and electronic appliances. Other stations sell studio time – or parts of the service have been privatised. Samoa notched 50 years of broadcasting in 1997: a year of "financial difficulties and drastic cuts": government station 2AP sells commercials, the advertising revenue goes to the government and the service has

to submit a budget request for funding.

Most island states have little reporting of crime in radio news. In a week of listening to the news via, say, Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation, only two or three crimes might get reported. Offences do occur but as any visiting journalist from Australia, New Zealand or western countries discovers quickly, news values are different. Seward highlights the differences: "As applied here, development journalism translates into less cynicism and less negative coverage of complex public events" – there are plenty of positive stories on economic and social development.

The book is not only about radio; local cultures come across strongly, also their inventive defences against intrusions from international marketing and media. If there is a criticism of Radio Happy Isles, is that it packs so much in – there is so much pleasurable reading on the media and Pacific politics. There is enough material for two books. It comes with glossary, detailed referencing and footnotes, also 10-page index. ■